

An Inaugural Thesis
on the advantages
of
Scepticism
in the study and improvement
of
Medicine

Submitted to the examination of
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for the
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Scepticism. &c

I have employed this term, because it appeared to be better calculated to express my meaning, than any other I could select; the sense in which I design to use it is somewhat different from that in general acceptance. —

The term scepticism has usually been employed to express a state of universal doubt or uncertainty of mind, incompatible with conviction of any kind. The possibility of the human mind's existing in such a state, has in my view been very justly called in question; certain it is that if such a state of mind be possible or exist in reality it must be

unchangeable; for the uncertainty is already infinite and therefore cannot be increased; and evidence on every subject is alike doubtful with the subject itself; so that any attempt to prove the truth or existence of any position or object to such a mind would be absurd; it is perhaps unnecessary to add that it would be equally absurd for such a being to attempt to prove any doctrine whatever to be either true or false—

By Scepticism then I mean that doctrine that denies the utility or even the existence of a principle of faith or believing faculty in the mind any farther than as it respects its own existence and attributes; and inculcates the propriety of requiring satisfactory evidence on every other subject before we give our assent.— This definition although somewhat different from that which is generally received, is I

undoubtedly for the uncertainty is always
infirm. And therefore cannot be a law
but only a law as we may see from what
should follow with the English words in that
any attempt to prove the truth or
to use of any matter or object to make
a law would be a law of the law
unnecessary to say that it would be equally
advised for such a thing to attempt to prove
any doctrine or doctrine to be either true
or false
My dear friend, the business that we
think that we are to be able to do
the sense of a fair right of faith or belief
is a matter of the mind and heart
there is a respect to our nature
and to our nature, even before the propriety
of expressing our thoughts in words or in writing
which before we give our own
this opinion that although we are not
know that which is generally known as a

conceive most consistent with the etymology
 of the term, as it is derived from the
 greek word *skeptomai* signifying to look
 into or examine to deliberate; but as it
 would be impossible to examine any ~~sub-~~
~~ject~~ ^{but} or deliberate upon it were every thing
 equally uncertain (for both these opera-
 tions necessarily imply the positive exis-
 tence of some objects) it is evident that no
 such meaning was affixed to it by the ancients.
 I do not wish to insinuate that derivative
 words ought always to be employed in a
 sense strictly conformable to the origi-
 nal theme; my only desire is to produce a
 sufficient warrant for using the term
 in a sense different from that in which
 it has been employed by those justly
 celebrated literary ~~and~~ men who have
 displayed so much ingenuity in support
 of the doctrine which would warrant the
 use of the phrase in the sense first mentioned

opening them the use of the term in the
 sense last given, I shall proceed to treat
 of the ~~the~~ ^{instructed} advantage of the state of mind
~~expressed~~ by it, in the study and improve-
 ment of medicine; ~~begin~~ by first adduc-
 ing some examples immediately in point
 to prove the advantages which have accrued
 to medicine from the state of mind before
 mentioned. Second. by shewing the injuries
 which have resulted from its opposite
 or too much credulity. Lastly offer a
 few remarks on the nature of the evidence
 which may be considered as decisive on
 medical subjects. —

Perhaps to persons who are acquainted with
 the characters of those who have contributed largely
 to the improvement of medicine, and who
 have studied ^{it} with most advantage to
 themselves and the public, ~~it~~ from Sydenham
 down to the present day, it may seem unneces-
 sary to say any thing on our first head —

But as direct example is perhaps the strongest evidence of the truth of any position, it would be improper to omit it entirely here.

Happily for mankind, such examples are frequently to be met with in the annals of medicine; as such it might be sufficient only to repeat the names of Sydenham, Harvey, Brown and Rush, to these might be added a long list of others, who are not less celebrated, whose omission in this place may seem invidious, but as my aim is to prove the truth of a particular position, without any attempt at panegyric or character, I shall be content with the examples already enumerated.

I presume it will not be contended by any that Sydenham, Harvey &c were enabled to detect the errors and improve the partially correct opinions and practice of their predecessors, by implicitly adopting their theories; But perhaps there are even yet some who are disposed to contend that all the

but in which you find the same
and in the first of your letters, where
you express the same sentiment.
I have the honor to be, Sir, your
very obedient servant,
J. M. Smith

boasted improvements in medicine are merely
specious pretences; to such I would reply by re-
questing them to take a comparative view of the
present and former modes of treating the Lues,
the small-pox and a number of other diseases
and the success attendant on each.

2^d I will now mention some facts as nega-
tive arguments to show the imperies which
have resulted and may result from pos-
sessing too little of this sceptical disposition.
Here I would gladly have been without
examples; but unfortunately for the
happiness of mankind they are perhaps
more numerous than the former class;
~~it is from this reason that~~ it is from possessing
too little scepticism; or in other words being
too little inclined to philosophical investi-
gation that the inhabitants of barbarous
countries and the vulgar of every country
place too much confidence in superstitious
ceremonies and inert remedies in the
cure of their diseases; from the same cause
the vender of nostrums is enabled to distribute

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his frequently useless but too often pernicious drugs. But there are examples of a much more important nature as it respects the improvement of the science of medicine; have not the benefits arising from the improvements which have been made in medicine by almost all the celebrated authors ancient as well as modern, been almost counterbalanced, by the erroneous principles, and practices, which first gained vurrency from their names and have since been retained by something of a superstitious veneration for their memories? Have not such of those great men formed as it were an Era in the science of medicine, after which its progress in improvement has been excited by the admiration which was excited by the improvements already made and the confidence placed in the doctrines and practices then taught and pursued? It would be superfluous to be more particular in giving examples ^{of the truth} of either of the preceding propositions, as every man who has read a single systematic work in medicine has seen

enough to convince the most obstinate.
~~The same~~ But perhaps all this may seem unneces-
 sary at the present day when innovation
 is so common and improvement (apparent-
 ly so rapid; but it is to be observed that this
 essay is not ~~an~~ written merely with a view
 of shewing the injuries which have resulted
 from such conduct in former times, but to
 prevent the like injuries from occurring now
 from the same cause viz by too ready a belief in
 the ingenious speculations and plausible
 innovations which have ^{late} been made in the
 the theory and practice of medicine. Let it
 not be infered from this that I believe all
 the late improvements in medicine ~~are~~ are
 merely pretences, such a belief would be not
 only absurd but (in me) highly arrogant;
 that many improvements of the highest
 importance and most extensive utility
 have been made, no one who has paid the least
 attention to the subject can doubt. But
 that there are also a number of innovations
 proposed whose correctness and utility have
 not been sufficiently demonstrated to

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entitle them to general confidence appears to be equally true; it therefore becomes necessary for us to enquire into the propriety of any proposed improvement in medicine, not with the sneering contempt of a bigot, educated in the old school, nor with the anxious curiosity of a modern innovator, who feels contempt for every thing which was known previous to the era of ~~the~~ his own existence, but with the candor and moderation of the disciple of truth; then shall we discover at least the probable importance of any doctrine which may be taught and the mode of the truth of the theories are advanced and regulate our practice accordingly, without being dazzled by the splendid pretences, or cheated by the wiles of sophistry. We shall by this means also avoid an enormous opposition to just principles which has always been an obstacle in the way of improvement in medicine.

3^d I will now make a few remarks on the evidence which may be considered as sufficient to establish the truth of theory and the propriety of practice in medicine.

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Although ~~the~~ ~~history~~ in the history of medicine
 we find a number of instances in which too
 little credit has been given to merely proposed
 theories and practice ~~is~~ ~~not~~ yet the reverse
 is most frequently the case. I do not pretend
 to decide which of the errors is attended with
 the fewest ill consequences, but certainly
 it is best to avoid both if possible; this can only
 be done by forming a proper standard of truth
 in theory and propriety in practice; this
 seems at first sight to be a very easy task
 because every one knows that no practice is
 proper but that which is successful, and
 no theory can be proper but that which
 produces successful practice. But though
 it cannot be denied that such a standard
 would be correct yet it does not appear to be
 of much ~~any~~ service, because if a criterion were
 formed in this way practice must always
 precede theory which would destroy the utility
 of principles in medicine and reduce physi-
 cians to the same level with the herd
 of empirics who practice at random and
 sport with the lives of their patients

It does not appear in the present state of our knowledge that a standard of truth and error in all respects proper and useful can be formed. Reasoning by induction which in most other cases has been very useful in the discovery of truth has fallen far short in medicine and has even been a fruitful source of error. Experience which has been considered as the foundation whereon to erect true theory in other sciences has failed in this; and so great has been its deficiency in medicine that its certainty in other sciences begins to be doubted.

How shall we account for the dissimilarity between this and other sciences? Hence is it that that which is an unwavering guide in other cases should in this only be found so insufficient and fallacious? Is it from the insufficiency of the means we employ or our not employing them in a proper manner? As I presume no one will contend that there are other modes of acquiring knowledge than what are already known, it must be admitted that the fault is in ourselves, the grand desideratum then is, to avoid the errors into which we have hitherto fallen in reasoning and expounding. After so much

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infectual labour on this subject by the most celebrated characters, it would justly be thought highly presumptuous for me to say any thing positive, I will therefore merely throw out one or two uncertain conjectures.

Perhaps there has been too much attention paid to some of the phenomena of ^{Disease} ~~life~~ to the exclusion of others; thus all the different ^{by time} grades and states of ~~of the same~~ diseases have been minutely attended to while too little attention has been paid to the distinct natures of each, ~~and~~ while others have paid too great regard to the nature of the disease without regarding its degree, hence as degree does not afford a distinguishing mark all diseases have been reduced to one by the former while they have been infinitely varied by the latter class of observers.

I do not know that there is any character which applies to all diseases so as to reduce them to one class except that they are all different from health, but that is nothing more than saying that they all are diseases which ^{is} ~~forms~~ nothing. Health as has been long observed is nothing more than an equilibrium or

just proportion between all the constituent parts of the system, and as those parts may be altered in their proportions in different ways each alteration will constitute a different disease; But again as each of these alterations may be greater or less this will afford a symptom not of a different ~~disease~~ disease but of a higher or lower grade of the same disease; this last is perhaps the stumbling block of the nosologists

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